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## Writing with Pictures: Immersive Technology and 21st Century Professional Development

[Spring 2010 / Focus](#)

by **Russell Carpenter**, Eastern Kentucky University

### Keeping pace with digital culture in the writing center



Russell Carpenter

#### A Culture of Learning

In *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich asks, "What kind of space is virtual space?" (254). This seemingly simple question will pose a number of challenges for writing centers as they develop services that transcend physical space. As writing center administrators integrate new media and technology into their operations, they must continue to invent and articulate theory that informs the development of virtual spaces. In *Heuretics*, Gregory Ulmer poses a related question: "What will research be like in an electronic apparatus?" (32). Ulmer explains that the notion of spatiality has changed since the development and widespread adoption of the computer (*Heuretics* 36). Indeed, it has, and the cultural and political landscape of the university has changed as well, as educational technology and virtual spaces are often at the heart of many academic institutions.

The culture of an academic environment should inform how writing center scholars develop practices for virtual space. "Put differently," Manovich writes, "to develop a new aesthetic of new media, we should pay as much attention to cultural history as to the computer's unique new possibilities to generate, organize, manipulate, and distribute data" (314). Therefore, virtual spaces should take into account the "learning culture," as Anne Ellen Geller et al. describe it, of writing centers (53). The culture of the writing center is one where students and consultants discuss writing-related issues as peers, one on one.

#### Writing center scholars will face the challenge of building digital communities in both physical and virtual settings.

Historically, writing centers have provided social spaces for intellectual discussion. Elizabeth Boquet, in *Noise from the Writing Center*, conveys the "joyful noise" that emanates from her writing center (1). In the prologue to the book, Boquet finds herself explaining to "Dr. PC," a professor whose office happens to be located near the writing center, that the loud disturbance that he heard coming from the writing center was not a "party" but an academic meeting where productive intellectual work was taking place. On any given day, you can walk into a writing center and notice that they are often bustling places where "noise," as Boquet says, fills the air. A productive writing center is a "noisy" writing center. In addition, they have also served as home to technological innovations of many kinds. The [International Writing Center Association's](#) 2008 conference theme, for example, invited participants to consider where writing centers have been and where they are going. It should not be a surprise that many presenters focused on the innovative use of technology in their writing centers. Several sessions even proposed further exploration in immersive environments like Second Life, "a 3D online digital world imagined, created, and owned by its residents," as Michael Rymaszewski et al. explain (4). [Second Life](#), at this unique time in the development of academic spaces, serves as a valuable intersection between our digital culture and the learning culture of the writing center.

According to Thomas Horan, “the key to building vibrant digital communities is to understand the differences and intersections between communities of place and communities of interest” (62). Writing center scholars will face the challenge of building digital communities in both physical and virtual settings. However, immersive virtual spaces hold great promise for writing center work. The immersive virtual space allows students to engage one another with many of the humanistic and interpersonal connections that are significant to face-to-face work. Through immersive virtual spaces, writing centers can also create communities of place and interest by offering visual elements of the physical environment that serve to enhance experiences online. In many cases, these elements are not readily available in purely textual spaces—like IM chat or e-mail. The move we are seeing could be to visually-oriented writing spaces.

### **Picture Writing and the Virtual Space**

Virtual museums, galleries, and installations offer perhaps the most compelling examples of what writing centers might ultimately look like and offer in virtual spaces. Suzanne C. Baker, Ryan K. Wentz, and Madison M. Woods contend that one of the advantages of teaching with (or in) Second Life is that students can travel to architectural sites, visit art galleries, and attend performances (61). Furthermore, Julia Gillen, in her discussion of Schome Park, the first European enclosed island on Teen Second Life (59), argues that a student’s participation in this environment is a hugely literate activity (72). Gillen makes the point that students might learn new literacy practices in virtual spaces by expanding their notion of literacy beyond linear print-based concepts. Writing centers and OWLs might serve the important role of developing multiliterate students responsive to the “ongoing conversation about the special responsibilities of humanities teachers in a digital age,” as Stuart Selber says (23). The writing center can, therefore, serve as a member of the university community not only for traditional print-based literacy practices but multimedia practices as well. The writing center can serve as a hub for developing new literacy practices indicative of student needs in the 21st century workplace. Horan notes that “local communities can play a crucial role in defining the nature and types of electronic-community services available to their citizens” (81). In fact, writing centers and virtual academic spaces can also assist students in the composition and production of digital media texts. The important concept of immersion can best be demonstrated through electronic environments.

### **Technologically sophisticated academic spaces should be responsive to a digital culture while embracing new methods, even if experimental or provisional.**

Kathryn Farley, Michael Nitsche, Jay Bolter, and Blair MacIntyre, in “Augmenting Creative Realities,” “blend the world of Second Life with real world artistic practices and their expressive range” (96). They call the artistic practices re-iterations of the interface in which users make artistic statements and express opinions in virtual spaces (96). Writing center scholars interested in developing virtual spaces responsive to the interests of students will want to prepare for visual forms of building and production. W. J. T. Mitchell, in *Picture Theory*, uses Habermas’s notion of the public sphere to pose his prescient question: “How should we picture the public sphere and the place of visual representation in it?” (363). As writing centers continue to decipher their spaces and rearticulate the role of technology within them, Mitchell’s question should continue to drive our scholarly practices. The virtual spaces in which we build have social foundations and goals. New forms of digital texts are inherently visual and will serve as the center of virtual spaces, augmenting, to recall Manovich’s work, space within digital environments.

### **Electronic Monuments as Digital Artifacts and Picture Writing**

While we will certainly face many challenges in constructing new virtual spaces for serious academic work, there are also examples of scholarship already taking place within spaces like Second Life. This work, in its highly visual, interactive, and personal form, can serve as a starting point for the ways in which these spaces are used in the writing center. It is, at least, worth taking a historical look at how these spaces have been used so that we can attempt to rethink our methods of composition. Tim Guest, in *Second Lives*, provides a number of valuable examples of very serious work taking place online. Guest describes 9/11 monuments erected in Second Life shortly after the tragedy:

In 2005, Second Life residents constructed hundreds of 9/11 memorials. Most avoided controversy: They built virtual memorial gardens, or virtual memorial plaques, or virtual memorial statues of New York firefighters raising the American flag. One man, ‘Rusty Vindallo,’ listed the names of all who had died that day. But another resident, ‘Sexy Casanova,’ bit the bullet, and constructed a much more detailed replica of the World Trade Center. (16)

SL residents saw the virtual space as a place where they could show their emotion. Residents erected powerful visual displays to pay tribute to the many people who lost their lives that day. While the monuments took many shapes and sizes, they had one thing in common—they were visual reminders. We might also consider them “electronic monuments,” as Ulmer calls them. Like public announcements, these electronic monuments remind

people of personal or cultural sacrifices or tragedy. Guest and Ulmer articulate a cultural and political shift—a move, as Ulmer says, to “electracy.” Ulmer offers insight into rearticulating the role of technology in an academic space, depicting visual forms of composition and scholarship in electronic environments.

Ulmer articulates the power of catastrophes to “motivate collective as well as individual reflection on the meaning and purpose of life” (*Electronic Monuments* x). He explains that the “disaster of 9/11 occurred at a time of apparatus shift—the emergence of a global electracy world out of a modern literate society” (x). Virtual spaces played host to many profound architectural developments. Ulmer and Guest depict important cultural changes taking place in virtual spaces. Everyday citizens are performing a new composition—one concerned, perhaps, with visuals more than words.

In much the same way, consultants might learn to compose in these new ways through the use of virtual spaces and new media technologies. I use the electronic monument as an example of multimedia composition and the potential for the serious and meaningful academic work that is taking place within virtual spaces. Consultants at many institutions are prompted to show a knowledge of new forms of digital composition, especially when working with digital media majors. When prompted to consult digital artifacts, such as a video, consultants can draw on their experiences with(in) technology to inform their strategies. Technologically sophisticated academic spaces should be responsive to a digital culture while embracing new methods, even if experimental or provisional.

Second Life offers a rich academic space for discussing and critiquing what we know and think we know about working in virtual space. During the spring 2009 semester, consultants at the University of Central Florida explored the virtual space of Second Life along with several significant building projects. The goal was for consultants to discuss race, culture, and gender within this immersive space. However, consultants were also asked what it means to “[l]earn not only how to write about images, but also to write *with* images,” (11). Based on talks with digital media students, I offer several exercises piloted at the University of Central Florida as professional development and digital praxis.

### Exercises

- Consultants visited Emerson College and toured “Imaging Place,” a place-based virtual reality project that combines panoramic video and three-dimensional virtual worlds to document situations where the forces of globalization are impacting the lives of individuals in local communities, as John (Craig) Freeman explains (“Imaging Place”). Consultants discuss this project and what it means for students to write with/in digital media and images.
- Consultants conducted a scavenger hunt in Second Life to explore some of the rich and interesting academic spaces now offered online. As part of their weekly training, they visited a list of libraries, museums, and campuses constructed in Second Life and asked questions of the scholars they found working there.
- Consultants were asked to interact with other people (avatars) in Second Life. During the seminar, they connected experiences in the virtual space with issues of gender, culture, and online persona.
- Consultants discussed writing at the Second Life University Writing Center (SLUWC), a virtual space originally developed at the University of Central Florida as a prototype writing center in an immersive virtual space. At the seminar, consultants discussed the significance of having an avatar present in their interactions along with similarities and differences between the immersive space and text-based space.

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Praxis is a project of the **Undergraduate Writing Center** at the University of Texas at Austin

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